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ABSTRACT

Steps that states, schools, and colleges should take to prepare students to meet higher college standards are identified, with a focus on two points: developing higher and clearer college entry standards and developing statewide assessments to identify high school students who need additional preparation. Eight suggestions are offered: (1) states should expect colleges and schools to develop statements of minimum skills and knowledge students need to begin degree-credit study at public colleges; (2) states should expect high schools to ensure that certain courses in their curriculum lead to the skills and knowledge needed to begin college; (3) the beginning college standards should be stated in terms that are understandable to high school students; (4) the standards should be communicated widely to parents and students; (5) states should require schools to assess the progress made by students in meeting the statewide standards; (6) the purpose of the assessments is to inform students of their progress in meeting the statewide standards for college entry and to diagnose how unprepared students can be helped; (7) states should ensure that these assessments reflect statewide standards and are applied in all schools and colleges; and (8) states should expect that college/school boards at state and local levels establish joint councils of their members and staffs. (SW)

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Getting Students Ready for College

Why and How We Must Change What We Are Doing

A Report To
The Southern Regional Education Board
by its Commission for Educational Quality

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Foreword

In 1985, SREB's *Access to Quality Undergraduate Education* recommended how state and higher education leaders could raise standards for entering and progressing through college and still preserve access. To do this means maintaining access to programs with higher standards by strengthening the preparation of students before they begin college degree-credit work. Access will be more valuable if it is provided not by lowering standards but by stronger preparation. Providing access to quality undergraduate education currently requires strong remedial education programs for college students not ready to meet the higher standards. A more satisfactory, long-term solution is to improve students' readiness for college while they are still in high school.

In the following report, SREB's Commission for Educational Quality sets forth fundamental steps that states and their schools and colleges should take to prepare school students to meet higher college standards. The report concentrates on two critical points—establishing higher and clearer college entry standards and making these known to students early in their high school years; and the development of statewide assessments to identify high school students who need additional preparation if they are to meet the college-entry standards.

Winfred L. Godwin
President

One-half of today's high school graduates will go to college. One-half of these students will not be ready to do the work expected of them.

Winfred L. Godwin, President
Southern Regional Education Board

How is it that as many as one-half of entering college freshmen are not prepared to do college work? More important, what can be done about it?

College-entry standards are weak, lack clarity

In every state in this nation any high school graduate can be admitted to some college—and probably will be able to choose among community and four-year colleges. This fact is now a part of the social and political fabric of our country. It underlies our national belief in opportunity. Most colleges and universities today are essentially open-door, or "less selective." This means that they admit high school graduates even if they have minimal high school grades or low scores on standardized examinations. Three out of four college freshmen are in these institutions. Perhaps only one-fifth of the nation's 3,000 colleges and universities are "selective."

Relatively few colleges and universities have standards to begin college degree-credit work other than high school graduation course requirements or minimal academic skill requirements. Higher standards for high school graduation will help many students prepare for college, as will new advanced high school diploma programs. But, with nearly half of the high school students drifting through a general curriculum, many entering freshmen will still not be prepared for college work.

School teachers have long had to deal with a difficult situation—having students who are years ahead and those who are years behind in the same classroom. College classes are often no different. This means that many classes are not "higher education" even though they provide college credit. These are not remedial courses; that is a different problem.

Wanted: Clear directions on how to prepare for college

If all high school graduates who apply to college are to be admitted—no matter how well or poorly prepared they are to do college work—how can higher education have value and credibility?

In *Access to Quality Undergraduate Education*, SREB outlined a plan to restore meaning to undergraduate education. The plan begins with higher college-entry standards. It does not propose denying admission to high school graduates who are not ready for college, but it does insist that all students have essential academic skills before they are allowed to begin college degree-credit work. The following recommendations are aimed at spelling out how colleges and schools can better prepare students for college work.

Today's open-door four-year and two-year colleges have a major role to play in improving higher education. These colleges send the message to most students about what will be expected of them. Because there are so many of these regional and community colleges, they have a powerful influence as the "local" college for most high school students.

Consider that more than half of high school seniors say they plan to attend college, but only a fraction are preparing for colleges that have relatively high entry standards. Thus, most students who are interested in college may not be getting clear directions on how to prepare. They may be "planning" to attend college, but their high school schedule and performance do not reflect their "plans." Without clear signals from the colleges, too many students have little motivation to prepare better.

Open-door colleges must play a major role

A motivation for many students today is unfortunately one that hurts them in the long run. High school students want good grades and, to get those grades, are willing to take the "easy" courses. Why take a harder course, risking a lower grade and trouble at home, if the course is not needed to get into college?

Only about 35 percent of high school students are in academic or college-preparatory programs. This is down from nearly 45 percent in the 1970s. A majority of students are in either the vocational (20 percent) or general (45 percent) curriculum. So, while more than one-half of high school students may be considering college, barely one-third are in programs that focus on essential academic preparation for college. Moreover, the performance of many students in the college preparatory curriculum is limited by the lack of clear college-entry standards. This means that as college standards are raised, literally tens of thousands of school students will need stronger preparation if their access to college is to be preserved.

Raising standards is a necessary first step in improving student performance. Higher expectations may move some students to improve their performance by trying harder, but many other students, particularly those with lower academic ability and interest, will need more help.

Setting College-Entry Standards

It's real difficult to tell a student to buckle down or he won't go to college when he knows he can get in even if he doesn't buckle down.

—A high school guidance counselor in an SREB state

I tell students to take the tough courses in high school and be prepared for college...but some tell me they'd rather face them later and take remedial courses in college.

—An SREB state high school guidance counselor

Raising standards is a necessary first step

To strengthen the preparation of high school students, colleges must first set entry standards that require a higher quality of college-level work and that expect more of school students preparing for college. *Higher college-entry standards will improve student performance both in college and in the high schools.*

Many colleges and universities have raised admissions requirements, on paper at least, or have announced higher standards for the future. Frequently these higher standards serve only as "guidelines," and admissions by exception may be the rule. Community colleges, which enroll half of all freshmen, have been slow to develop meaningful standards for beginning college degree-credit study.

Few colleges enforce minimum requirements for admission

It is very difficult to determine the extent to which standardized admissions test criteria have been raised. Few colleges have an absolute minimum; they choose instead to link test scores to other school performance measures, such as course grades. This practice permits flexibility in admitting students but may place more importance on high school grades as indicators of the skills needed to begin college than they presently deserve.

The method most frequently used by states to improve college-entry standards is to raise the kind and number of required high school courses. These new standards, which exceed the basic high school graduation requirements, are being phased in over several years; typically, they include an extra year of mathematics, science, and foreign language. Higher entry requirements are valuable and necessary, but relying on them as the primary—or sometimes only—entry standards has several disadvantages. First, many states might not include all of the colleges in the higher education system—for example, community/junior colleges may not require these courses. Second, while having the same title, content and performance standards of the courses may vary across schools—an English course in one school may cover more material and demand more of students than in another school.

Begin by defining specific skills required for college success

An additional approach to raising college-entry standards emphasizes student skills and knowledge. This approach begins by defining the specific learning skills and knowledge students should possess before beginning college work. The College Board's Educational EQuality Project has developed statements of compentencies on what students should know and be able to do before entering college. These competencies, which are gaining national acceptance, provide a solid base from which colleges and schools can agree on specific skills and knowledge to emphasize in school courses.

Emphasis on the outcomes of school—the skills developed and the knowledge gained—is promising. The challenge will be to get college and school faculty to build the standards into the regular coursework. Schools must find ways to make sure that the key skills and knowledge actually are taught and measured throughout the school curriculum.

If states are to deal with the situation that half of their freshmen are not prepared to do college work, they must first set standards for the skills

needed to begin college. These standards must then be communicated to high school students in terms they can understand and at stages in their school careers when they still have time to correct their weaknesses. Giving high school students directions about college-entry standards will require new ways to tell students what they must know and be able to do. This is not just telling them what courses they should take or what grades they should have, which is about all that can be done today. This is getting the attention of high school students in a new way—letting them know what reading, writing, and mathematics skills they must have to be ready for college-level work. These guideposts and schedules currently do not exist, mostly because of the lack of agreement on college-entry standards. Without firmly established college-entry standards, it is virtually impossible for schools to determine how to help students know whether they are on track for college. The emphasis on outcomes and skills will not change the fact that courses and grades will still be the principal way for students and parents to learn what is expected to be prepared for college.

Getting the attention of high school students in a new way

College and school faculties should work together to define the skills and knowledge that high school students should have to ensure success in college. It will then be up to the teachers to define and communicate these specific standards to students by making them a part of the high school curriculum, teaching methods, and grades.

There are some hopeful signs. Several SREB states, including Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Texas, have developed statements similar to those outlined by the EQuality Project. In seven states—Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee—school and college faculty are working together to put these general statements into terms that are specific and meaningful to individual schools and colleges. This is especially valuable if done on a local or regional basis, involving networks of colleges and the particular schools that supply most of their students. Also, there are movements in many states (including California, Illinois, Louisiana, and Ohio) to establish school/college faculty groups in which teachers and faculty in the same subject area address issues relating to curriculum and instruction. During the past four years, more than 2,500 teachers and faculty have joined forces, using as a model the "Academic Alliances" program developed at the University of Pennsylvania. While the main purpose of these alliances is now faculty development, they offer great

College-school networks to determine needed skills

potential for generating strengthened instructional standards and programs.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, teachers analyze the content and expectations of the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) to determine what students need to cover and achieve in earlier high school coursework to do well on the SAT. The results of the analysis are built into the ninth and tenth grade curriculum. South Carolina has analyzed the SAT to develop a similar program.

1 States should expect colleges and schools to develop statements of the minimum skills and knowledge that all students should possess to begin degree-credit study at any public college or university. These statements should specify measurable standards of performance. These standards should then be applied statewide as a base which individual colleges and high schools should be encouraged to exceed.

2 States should expect high schools to ensure that designated courses in their curriculum actually lead to the skills and knowledge needed to begin college. States should encourage regional groups of school and college faculty in each subject area or discipline to determine how to refocus school coursework on the needed skills and knowledge. Teachers and faculty from several disciplines should examine how general learning skills, such as reading and writing, can be taught throughout the school curriculum.

3 The beginning college standards should be stated in terms that are understandable and useful to high school students to help them develop skills and knowledge at each grade level. Students at each grade should have clear indicators that lead to the development of the essential skills and knowledge required to begin college study.

4 These standards of skills and knowledge required for beginning college should be communicated widely to parents and students. Schools should make clear how specific school coursework relates to the step-by-step development of the needed skills and knowledge.

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Assessing College Preparation

Needed: A new type of student assessment

Students must know the standards for preparing for college *and* the progress they are making in meeting them. Today's high school students do not know early enough what specifically needs to be done to prepare for college. Obviously, high schools encourage students to prepare, but for many students the schools do not have the tools to do the job. A new type of student assessment may be the tool needed. Student assessment is essential in applying the standards for college entry and finding out who needs additional help in meeting them. Through assessment, standards are translated into practical performance terms by providing specific goals that students have to meet in preparing for college.

Evaluate student performance from early high school to college entry

Assessments must evaluate student performance at different stages of development, from early high school to college entry. The assessments should indicate to individual students at various grade levels how they are doing toward developing the specific skills needed for college. Three criteria should mark these assessments. First, the major goal should be to help students prepare for college. The assessments should be developed and administered to identify which students need more help if they are to succeed in college and to diagnose what kind of assistance may be needed. Over half of all students entering college will fail to graduate. Many more students could develop the skills needed to succeed in college if they knew what the skills were. Colleges and schools need to express exactly what skills are essential for college-bound students and assess student progress in meeting them. Because these skills are essential for beginning college work, the assessments should be geared toward identifying whether students possess them. The goal is not to assess which students are more prepared than others, but to determine whether a student has developed, or is on the way to developing, certain critical skills. These assessments will not replace tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) and American College Test (ACT).

Identify whether students possess critical skills

Second, every high school across the state should use similar assessments. Course grading, which ideally should be the principal or sole evaluation of student preparation for college, simply varies too much among schools. The variation and uncertainty in course grading underscores the need for a statewide assessment of the progress made by school students in meeting statewide college-entry standards, at least for certain essential learning skills. Schools and colleges might review the results of these assessments to make comparisons with students' grades and their subsequent performance in college.

Third, the statewide assessments should focus on the essential skills—what students should be able to do to begin college study. Because they enable further learning, the critical skills are reading, writing, and mathematics. Knowledge of specific subjects, such as in the sciences or humanities, is important. However, it is the critical basic skills that need to be developed step-by-step, and that should be assessed at various points in their development.

Existing testing programs that were designed to measure minimum high school graduation competencies or functional literacy skills probably cannot be adapted to include college-entry measures; the content does not address the higher level skills needed for college. It is also questionable to what extent tests such as the SAT and ACT could be used. The purpose of the SAT and ACT is to identify more able students not to identify and diagnose weaknesses of unprepared students. In addition, these tests, which are not administered until the 11th or 12th grade, are offered too late to be of much help to the students who need it. The major purpose of the proposed college-preparation assessments would be to identify students who are not on course for college and to diagnose how to help them.

The critical college skills: Reading, writing, mathematics

As states consider the development of this kind of assessment they will undoubtedly face this question—"another test?" The recommendation for another kind of student assessment is not made lightly. It is made with full knowledge that there is more student testing today than ever before, and that more is coming. An important new testing program is being developed by state school leaders and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This program will test a representative sample of students to give each state never-before-available information on how results

compare to current and truly national and regional results and to results in other states. Because it can help evaluate educational progress and become a very credible public accountability measure, this state-National Assessment program is important.

But a weakness remains in current student testing programs. Students do not get direct signals that help motivate them to prepare for college. The minimum competency high school graduation tests, which nearly every student passes, serve a purpose—but not this one. In one state, for example, the passage rate on the high school graduation test is 98 percent, but one-half of entering college freshmen have to take remedial education. Present state-developed and national tests given in high school are not related to college preparation. They are not designed to tell students whether they are learning what they will need to do well in college. It should be no surprise that high school students become complacent about these tests. The results may not be reported until the following year and they have little meaning to the students. The answer to the question "another test?" should challenge states to evaluate the purposes and priorities of the entire range of their current high school testing programs.

States should evaluate purposes and priorities of current testing programs

There are ways that this college-preparation assessment could be possible without any dramatic increase in testing. The college-related assessments might be consolidated with other state testing programs that assess higher than minimum skills. The college-preparation assessments could be voluntary, and might be offered in grades in which other tests are not offered. They could be given on a Saturday, as is the case with the SAT and ACT. Finally, states might exempt students from the minimum competency examinations or other grade-level assessments if they make a certain score on the college-related assessment. The proposed college-preparation assessment need not be a time-consuming program; a part of one day is all that would be required.

Statewide assessments of progress in preparation for college should be seen as a foundation. States should encourage colleges and schools to establish standards for higher order skills and knowledge and to develop assessment techniques that recognize more advanced student performance. As colleges and schools develop their own higher standards and assessments, states could certify that the requirements set forth in the statewide criteria and assessment are met. It is likely, however, that

initially some form of statewide assessment will be needed. This would serve as a baseline and challenge to colleges and schools to develop their own ways to let high school students know the progress they are making in preparing for college.

Establish standards for higher order skills and knowledge

Currently, few states have statewide assessment programs that tell students whether they are on track for college. One notable example is Ohio's Early Mathematics Placement Testing Program (EMPT). High school juniors may take the test used by universities in Ohio to determine readiness for college math. Started in 1977 as a simple arrangement between Ohio State University and one school district, this program is now funded by the legislature and is available on an optional basis to all students in the state. Each student receives a computer printout indicating the EMPT score and the coursework and skills needed before placement in college-level study. Students are counseled into appropriate courses to be taken before high school graduation.

Ohio is now developing a similar program for English skills. It will identify student writing strengths and weaknesses in relation to college-entry standards, and help college and school faculties develop better ways to teach and evaluate writing ability. The major shortcoming of the Ohio approach is that students are not assessed earlier so that there is more time to strengthen their preparation. Yet it is a good program that could be adapted, and adopted, fairly easily by SREB states as an important first step.

New Jersey is considering a more comprehensive approach possibly involving a statewide testing program in high school, and at the beginning of the freshman and junior years in college. The tests and standards in high school would lead directly to those needed for placement in degree-credit study and successful work in college. School students would be able to see clearly the links between school preparation and college study.

5 States should require schools to provide for assessment of the progress made by school students in meeting the statewide standards for the skills and knowledge needed to begin college. Colleges and schools should be responsible for developing the assessments. Through their educational and budgetary policies, states should encourage colleges and schools to develop these assessments jointly.

6 The purpose of these assessments is to inform individual school students of their progress in meeting the statewide standards for college entry and to diagnose how unprepared students can be helped. There should be a series of assessments that measure whether students at earlier points in high school are moving successfully toward the college-entry standards. The final assessments in the series should indicate whether students possess the skills and knowledge needed to begin college and should be used for placement in degree-credit study in college.

7 States should ensure that these college-preparatory assessments reflect statewide standards and are applied in all schools and colleges. However, states should encourage colleges and schools to set higher standards and develop more rigorous assesments, which then could replace or parallel the more basic statewide standards and assessments.

Responsibilities for Action

Challenging a wider range of students

The aim of these recommendations is to strengthen the preparation of high school students for college. In the past, students in the lower 75 percent of achievement ranges have not been challenged directly by significant standards for college admission or by course grades. As college standards are increased, states must make special efforts to get these high school students ready for college. Otherwise we face the prospect of a generation that will have less, not more, education than its parents. That is not acceptable for our states or for our nation.

Setting standards and assessing students are necessary first steps in strengthening the preparation of students for college. But the real effectiveness of these efforts will be determined by what is done differently to prepare those students who "plan" to go to college but are not on course for such study. This will depend upon states, colleges, and schools

directing new or strengthened programs, personnel, and dollars to help these students. SREB will monitor and evaluate college-school actions and state-level policies that support such purposes.

To help develop stronger college-readiness programs in the schools, colleges should let schools know specifically how their students have fared on placement for degree-credit work and in their first-year courses. For schools this information could be a much more helpful measure than the SAT or ACT to help teachers evaluate curricula and grading patterns. Reports on college-readiness could be the agenda for workshops with school and college faculty. Already, four SREB states require that public colleges report the performance of students to their former high schools. Georgia and South Carolina have long reported information; Florida and Louisiana have recently passed legislation mandating the same kind of reporting. Groups of college and school faculty can examine ways that their subjects can be taught more effectively to a wider range of school students. College students could serve their communities and gain valuable experience by tutoring school students.

Joint councils to initiate college-school actions

The need for colleges and schools to work together to strengthen preparation is so great that its priority should be formalized in state policy and actions. This is not to say that a new office of college-school relations should be established. However, each state should develop policies, procedures, and an agenda that require state and local college and school leaders to jointly address issues of standards, preparation, and assessment. State-level boards for public schools and higher education should form joint councils of members and staff to recommend plans for college-school actions and monitor their implementation. States should encourage college and school board members, faculty, and administrators to form local groups for the same purpose. Among the first issues to be considered by these councils should be standards and their assessment for college entry and the ways in which higher education might work with the schools to strengthen the preparation of school principals and teachers.

8 States should expect that college and school boards at state and local levels establish joint councils of their members and staff. These councils would be responsible for ensuring that critical college-school issues, such as college-entry standards and assessment and the preparation of teachers and school principals, are addressed.